Homily for 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time 2011

Last week I visited Caboolture for the opening of new School buildings and Parish Centre. It startled me a bit to think that of the six hundred or so children gathered there 99% of them would not have been born when I left that appointment to come to Nambour! Such public events are always occasions for honoured guests like me and dignitaries to take their place. All are addressed according to their proper titles.

Jesus injunction to his disciples about not using titles is probably one of his least observed teachings. He was very aware of the dangers of power and position. They can easily lead to hypocrisy. To call someone a “hypocrite” is probably the most overused used term of abuse in politics. Literally the Greek word means an “actor on a stage”, someone who wears a mask. In ancient Greek drama the actors in fact often wore stylised masks. The word then had a positive meaning but gradually became a term to describe someone who is, in Jesus words, “not practising what they preach.” It may not always be an insult but a statement of fact in Jesus' time. There is always a need for us to heed his words and question our use of honorific titles because every human organisation including the Church finds it necessary to differentiate roles and positions in a community. It becomes a problem when those roles and privileges are sought for their own sake.

Jesus here is addressing not the Jewish leaders but the people and his own disciples. It is a clear warning to them. As Matthew is writing his Gospel he surely has the situation of his readers in mind, that is, the early Church, and therefore us as well. Matthew's Gospel has long been regarded as the Gospel of Church order. At that time the early Church is struggling with its place in the world as it finds itself at odds with Jewish leadership by following Jesus. The Christians must have been torn between holding on to their precious Jewish religious heritage and the choice they made to be followers of Jesus. As the Church then establishes its identity it is not to model itself on the behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees. Yet it must respect what they teach just as he did.

So what is the basic reason Jesus gives for not using titles? Simply, because we are all brothers and sisters. As brothers and sisters we have but one Father, God. And we have one teacher, Christ. That idea of a family is taken up by Paul in our reading from Thessalonians. He describes himself, not as a rabbi, or teacher, or someone superior, but as a mother. Paul feels like a devoted and protective mother feeding and looking after her children. That is hardly a patriarchal image! Would that we kept that image in mind as a model for Church leadership over the centuries. Someone in our RCIA groups asked what the title “Pope” means. It simply means “papa”, “father”. The intention of our use of the title “Father” for priests has more to do with Paul's notion of us being family of brothers and sisters under God than being a symbol of domination.

So to put it another way if we do seek to be first, let us be first to forgive, first to offer healing, first to serve our brothers and sisters. And at the risk of being labelled weak, let us be the last to condemn, the last to put someone down. That is the only honour a Christian seeks. At the same time to forgive, to heal and to serve, does not mean to ignore the truth. To face the truth of the failures of some in the Church, for example, is the first step toward healing and reconciliation. Restitution to those who are unjustly treated is a prerequisite for forgiveness. We have often forgotten that and too easily seen forgiveness alone as the end of the process. With the failures of a few priests in the Church the whole Church can seem to be made the scapegoat for all the ills of society. Even so, the Church needs to offer healing and not simply indignation. This is beyond us. But for God all is possible. Where sin abounds grace is even more abundant.

Jesus is about lifting burdens from people not imposing ones which he himself would not lift. “My yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matthew 11:30).